

Sailor Beware

Katie was off to Belfast on a teachers' training course. Returning home only at weekends. My little sister. She was much younger than Noreen who looked after her in a motherly way. Especially when returning from Belfast. Not having the same jealous manner towards her, they enjoyed each other's company.

It was a real surprise when joining the local drama club, Katie had less time to enjoy her big sister's company on those short weekends.

Recruited by her school friend Sally's enticement. She suited the role of the Sailors 'bride to be' in the play 'Sailor Beware.'
Studiously learning her lines in those practice hours of the drama.

The players met on Friday and Saturday evenings in the Parochial Hall in Keady. Their mentor a serious minded, much respected, older man. A teacher from the local boys school. Mister Rafferty. Drama was his joy. Attending plays all over the County of Armagh during those holy seasons of Lent. Give him the urge. The idea to have his own drama group and produce a play.

The play was beginning to take shape. Although Katie, his newest recruit, was ideal for the part she had difficulty remembering her lines. The 'bride' in the play had a leading role. So he advised her to keep speaking, make the lines up, try never to stop or be silent when parts of the conversation eluded her. To practice harder.

The timing of performing was during the 'Lent' period. Those timed weeks before Easter when Catholics practiced forty days of giving up their favourite food, or performing abstinence of eating between meals and meat on Fridays.

During that season, plays or entertainment took place all over the county. A distraction maybe from those lenient weeks. Noreen often tagged along with the group. Helping with travel in her car, providing snacks with juice for the journeys.

The first booking was in the 'Hall.' Knowing all the stage size, side entrance and exit doors along with the sound range made the opening night a comfortable venue.

Except for the few lapses in Katie's memory, quickly covered up by Dermot. Those two leading players performed well. The whole

play was a success. With renewed confidence in the bookings that followed, locally, mister Rafferty was also keen to join 'The Drama Club Festival' of Northern Ireland.

These were more serious events. But as they weaved their way during the early 'Troubles' of the late 1960s, with only sporadic barriers and checks. The success and craic was worth it all. Often listed in the top three performances, this amateur club was in 'seventh Heaven.' Of course there were a few memorable performances that makes Katie recall to this very day. Especially after a few

vodkas, in company. Her favourite tippie.

“There was this evening,” she began “when we went to a country hall near Monaghan just at the border to southern Ireland. Luckily, arriving earlier than usual without any road checks, we were advised by the hall staff to begin setting up the stage. With the furnishings etc for our play. We were flabbergasted by this statement. Not knowing about supplying our own, that stage was empty. Panic set in as we questioned the request,” she continued. As the rest of the story unfolded. Mary, her stage mother looked at Katie for help.

Katie was one of those people who solved quirky problems. Was a master of plans. A plan no one could think of. She quickly put her arm in Mary's and took command of the situation. "You boys unload the costumes and bags. Be on the ready though when we return." As she continued her tale we knew there would be more.

Mary and Katie knocked on a nearby farmers door, disclosing to his wife their predicament. Boldly asking if they had any old furniture stored away and willing to loan.

Three judges sat in front of the stage. Just behind them Paddy and Marie, the farmers sat proudly along with fellow country folk in the next row. Announcing the winners of that 'stage' of the drama contest. Winning the 'Best Stage Set,' and coming second in their play was a pleasant shock as the players drove away full of laughter, that the reality of checking out all the aspects and needs for their next showing the following week was foremost in their plans.

Ballymacnab Hall, just a few miles out of Armagh, was a fairly new venue. Having been built on the site of an older country hall.

Near the roadside, on a large farm, just a half mile from 'The Bull's Track.' 'The Bull's Stone' it's referred to, is an ancient stone, on a small grassy area at the junction of Newtownhamilton Road and Ballymacnab, has connections to Saint Patrick. In the mid fifth century, Saint Patrick was hindered by a bull. He cast the bull two miles from Armagh where he wanted to build a church. That church he then built in Armagh City, 'Saint Patrick's Cathedral.' The bull's hoof hit the stone. Leaving his imprint at the cross roads.

Katie and Noreen's mother were from the 'Nab', the shortened

name for the area. They spent lots of happy days with their cousins and friends from the area. Katie knew there would be a great gathering in the 'Nab' hall for the play. She had attended ceilis, quizzes and even Irish dancing lessons, as a child, there.

The layout of the hall was familiar to her. The task of setting out the stage, by the drama group on the evening of the performance was left in her charge. Seeing the audience arriving early those nervous butterflies began to build up in the players. Katie and Noreen spied their aunts, uncles and all her cousins too, taking seats just

behind. Katie's fiancée and his family sitting in the front row.

“Welcome,” began Mister Rafferty, “Sailor Beware is about to begin. We hope you enjoy the play. Thank you all for coming.” To a glorious applause the curtains opened.

The evening of the ‘wedding’ all players were on stage. The posh mother of the bride was discussing her daughters wedding to the sailor. “A man of no means or status on dry land.” She was not a happy woman.

Katie held up well remembering her lines with tiny notes, in pen, on her wrist. As she commended her husband, to be, to all who would listen just as he walked on to the stage. He had overheard her mother's comments.

Katie's nerves began to subside as the play continued until Dermot began to leave the stage saying, "Okay I'll call it a day. Your a besem woman's son. Your from Longford Bog," the mother called loudly after him. "I'll not be here 'on the morn,' he replied shouting in reply.

As Dermot left the stage going towards the side door, Katie

began to giggle. She was too late to stop him. Too late to give him advance notice.

Opening that side door, the players all saw him trip out into the field on that moonlit night. The cows close by as he tumbled into the 'cow's clap' grass. As mister Rafferty kept on prompting from the side curtains, he was unaware of the crisis as Katie and all the players could not stop their hysteria, those unforgiving laughs. The audience was not amused as complete silence descended. Poor master Rafferty. Poor Katie.

Katie's amateur acting role was over then. The last evening of the performance. Remembering the questioning re the laughter from the family. The friends who were not amused always makes her smile as she continues to recount those happiest of times.